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Mirosława Buchholtz.*The Beautiful and the Doomed: Essays on Literary Value.*

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REFERENCES

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1 In her wide-ranging study Mirosława Buchholtz brings into the domain of literary theory and criticism the forgotten issue of value. She begins by offering in the Introduction a succinct and incisive account of current attempts to theorize the concept of value. She argues that these attempts, indebted as they are to philosophical canon, have tended to link value with such pragmatic pursuits as evaluation, teaching, and interpretation, and hence to encourage instrumental treatment of literature. Questioning what is usually taken for granted, Buchholtz locates her own interpretative endeavors far from the sphere of immediate usefulness. She comments on the dynamic view of literary value as exemplified in an essay by Barbara Herrnstein Smith[1] and in Cristina Vischer Bruns' recent book.[2] Whereas Smith sees value in conjunction with the normative, and often oppressive, activity of evaluation, Bruns links it with the egalitarian process of reading, viewing the concepts of "the value of literature" and "the value of literary reading" as synonyms. Buchholtz distances herself from both of these approaches and offers her book as a series of interventions permeated by good will. The concept of intervention is indebted to Jean-Jacques Lecercle[3] and the concept of good will, to Immanuel Kant, who is only briefly mentioned as part of common knowledge. Buchholtz focuses on the "transactional nature of literary art, which [...] involves large numbers of individual authors, texts, readers, languages, and encyclopedias, all of them interrelating in endless ways in space, time, and recently virtually beyond both these dimensions" (10). Like

Lecercle, Buchholtz seeks to extract interpretation from "the discursive realm of judgement" (Lecercle, 237) and to reject both "the relativism of historicism" and "the dogmatism of a truth that is revealed once for all" (235). Buchholtz argues that "Kant's idea of the 'good will' for which his categorical imperative seems to set the benchmark, may well be the only intrinsic value in, around, and outside of literature" (10). I would encourage her to develop this point and write a full-fledged study on literary value. I have no doubt she would be capable of it. For the time being, one of the many strengths of *The Beautiful and the Doomed* has its source in Buchholtz's awareness of the cultural location of her own knowledge in Central Europe, in defiance of the God-trick and the pluralism-trick, which are omnipresent in contemporary criticism.

2 *The Beautiful and the Doomed* consists of essays written during a quarter of a century of Buchholtz's academic work, some of them previously presented at conferences and published in books or journals. In spite of the impressive variety of topics and critical approaches evident in all sixteen essays, Buchholtz's pursuits are all of a piece. The book is divided into four chapters, each of them consisting of several essays. Chapters One and Two hinge on the juxtaposition of the celebrated and the forgotten authors. Chapters Three and Four comment on the exchange between the cultural mainstream and margin. The structure of the book makes its argumentation all the more vivid and shows the author's ability to present clearly and convincingly what seems to be an inextricable knot of knots. The essays focus on the areas of the scholar's expertise, i.e. the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglophone and especially North American literature, children's literature, film, poetry, reception, and translation.

3 In Chapter One: "The Ennob(e)led" Buchholtz takes a look at institutions whose function it is to attribute value to literary texts: the literary critic (such as D.H. Lawrence) and the award-giver (for example the Swedish Academy). She examines the ways in which both kinds of institution have shaped the perception of American literature and self-perception of American authors, who often turned their Nobel-Prize acceptance speeches into literary or political manifestoes. In the remaining essays of Chapter One, Buchholtz discusses the impact of the Nobel Prize on the lives and work of such laureates as W.B. Yeats (the Nobel Prize of 1923), T.S. Eliot (1948), Czesław Miłosz (1980), and William Golding (1983), all of them deeply concerned with the issue of value in life and in literature. Mirosława Buchholtz explores the double role of Yeats as poet and senator, Miłosz's experience of negotiating between languages, Eliot's influence on Polish literature of the mid-twentieth century, and Golding's war against critics and biographers.

4 Chapter Two: "The Forgotten" consists of essays on American authors who are no longer remembered, or else have never been widely known. The chapter begins with a study of Lorenza Stevens Berbineau's travel account, followed by meticulous readings of Frank Stockton's once popular fairy tales, Charles Chesnutt's tales of the post-bellum South, and Conrad Aiken's poetry for children. Although diffuse in its interests, the chapter shows the political purpose inherent in writing and in rediscovering of old texts. Berbineau's travel account, which was literally recovered from under a thick layer of dust, speaks volumes about American lower-class womanhood and social mobility in the mid-nineteenth century. Stockton's and Chesnutt's tales illustrate the political involvement of the late nineteenth-century American literature. The example of Conrad Aiken's marginalized mid-twentieth century poetry for children illustrates the conflict of the natural and the unnatural.

5 In Chapter Three: "From Margin to Mainstream" Buchholtz focuses on Canadian literature for young readers. The main criterion she adopts in her analyses is that of ethnic diversity. This chapter hinges to a large extent on comparisons of texts by different authors of the same ethnic background and includes essays on two Chinese Canadian authors of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century, two Japanese Canadians, who addressed the painful history of discrimination during World War II, and two Native Canadian authors, who sought to negotiate between politics and myth in an attempt to forge an identity for their First Nations heroes and readers. The chapter ends with an inspiring essay on the dialectic of realism and folklore in multicultural books for young readers in Canada. Although Buchholtz does not address the issue of pedagogy directly, it is never far away from the main concerns of her study, especially in the chapter devoted to children's books.

6 Chapter Four: "From Mainstream to Margin" offers analyses of two films addressed to juvenile or family audience: *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) and *The Brothers Grimm* (2005). It hinges on the assumption that with the rise of the Internet, the cinema has lost its status of popular culture. Both essays included in this chapter explore the intersection of scholarly pursuits, cinematic praxis, and political activity. This chapter, like the one before testifies to Buchholtz's interest in cultural products designed for children. Like Chapter Two, this one also focuses on the politics of artistic production. Buchholtz exposes both uses and abuses of academic and cinematic historicization, as well as tense relations between politics and aesthetics.

7 Informed by a thorough mastery of a very large cultural field, *The Beautiful and the Doomed* celebrates reading and writing, in defiance of covert (or unconscious) attempts to categorize and evaluate. It highlights critical mechanisms which have too often been taken for granted and opens a discussion on literary value in post-postmodern times.

NOTES

1. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Value/Evaluation," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1990: 177–185).

2. Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*, (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).

3. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, (London: Macmillan, 1999).

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